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Inclusive pedagogy in Australian universities: A review of current policies and professional development activities

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Abstract

This article reports on activities undertaken by Australian universities to support academic staff to provide inclusive teaching. The findings of two lines of inquiry are reported - a desktop audit of the presence of inclusive teaching or universal design for learning (UDL) in publically available policies and procedures documents, and a survey of the methods adopted to build staff capacity to provide inclusive teaching and learning. Just over a third (34.21%) of Australian universities referred to inclusive teaching or UDL in their policies and procedures. A wide range of current practices in professional development for inclusive teaching was reported, with the most frequent being one-off workshops focussing on accommodating specific groups of students. Improved institutional support through policies, procedures and professional development would enable Australian higher education teachers to provide quality inclusive teaching to all students.

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Introduction

Curriculum, assessment and teaching practices informed by socially inclusive pedagogies have the potential to meet the needs of all learners (Barrington, 2004). In the context of universal participation in higher education (Clarke & Nelson, 2014) and enabling student equity, universities are attracting higher numbers of students with diverse backgrounds and levels of academic preparedness. These developments have led to a stronger focus on the pedagogical strategies and institutional approaches that universities can deliver to support all students in their studies (Gale, 2010; Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010). Universities have a responsibility to examine the way they teach for inclusion and diversity, by moving widening participation "from the margins to the mainstream" (Thomas & May, 2005).

Inclusive teaching and learning are the methods by which "pedagogy, curricula and assessment are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant and accessible to all" (Hockings, 2010, p. 1). Most of the work to date around mainstreaming inclusive practice in higher education has focused on identifying and addressing issues particular to students with a disability or other forms of disadvantage (Adams & Brown, 2006). Disadvantage is viewed as resulting from personal difference, and the cause of the "problem" is attributed to the individual (May & Bridger, 2010). The goal of traditional approaches to disadvantaged students has been to integrate them into existing practices and minimise any differences—an approach that is now understood to create and perpetuate disadvantage. The focus on individual students' backgrounds, circumstances and needs" creates the view that the person is the problem, and that divergence from the norm is a deficit to be addressed. This view problematises difference and potentially marginalises and stigmatises the students involved, leaving unexamined any practices and policies that discriminate, exclude, create inequity or prevent access, participation and success for *all* students. An egalitarian approach to learning provides all students with the same opportunities to reach their potential (Smith & Armstrong, 2005, p. 11).

An inclusive pedagogy is particularly important to support first year students in making their transition to higher education. There is considerable evidence for the importance of the first year experience in determining how students feel about and approach their learning (Krause & Coates, 2008). Academic success is enhanced when students feel they belong at university, have a sense of purpose and are socially connected to at least one other student (Lizzio, 2006). Inclusive teaching approaches engage students and create a sense of belonging by fostering social connections and providing opportunities to connect, collaborate and share their learning (Kift, 2009).

The principles of inclusive teaching and learning call for institutions to be "just, inclusive and engaging of all by understanding the nuanced experiences of all students within highly diverse student groups" (Hockings, 2011, p.192). It is therefore the learning environment rather than the individual that requires examination and adaption. This shifts the deficit model" of difference to a more sophisticated understanding of diversity that incorporates a number of characteristics, including previous education, personal disposition, current circumstances and cultural background (Thomas & May, 2010). From this perspective, differences between students

are valued as a resource that enriches the classroom and enhances others' learning, rather than being viewed as problems to be overcome (Griffiths, 2010; Hitch et al., 2012; Hockings, 2010).

Providing inclusive education that removes barriers to participation and acknowledges and harnesses learner diversity requires engagement with an "anticipatory approach to curriculum design" (Hockings, 2010, p. 4), so that curricula, assessment and classroom activities meet the learning needs of all students. Gale and Mills (2013) identify three dimensions of pedagogy—belief, design and action—and propose three principles that underpin an inclusive pedagogy: the belief that all students offer value to the learning environment, the design of a pedagogy that values difference, and actions that work *with* students rather than impose predetermined actions upon them. This contrasts with traditional curriculum design and teaching practices that are generally informed by the assumption that all students arrive with the same levels of knowledge, academic preparedness and motivation, learn the same content at the same rate, and employ the same strategies to acquire and demonstrate their learning.

These questions of how institutional policies, curriculum design, and teaching practices interact with and value students' beliefs, knowledge and experiences, raise significant questions at the level of the institutional, program and individual teaching academic. According to Haggis (2006), "many of the problems experienced by learners are at least partly being caused by the cultural values and assumptions which underpin different aspects of pedagogy and assessment" (p. 533). Capacity building, induction, communities of practice and professional development initiatives are key components of a strategic approach to confronting these questions and moving towards an inclusive pedagogy (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay, 2012; Thomas & May, 2010). However, the extent to which Australian universities are engaging in these activities has not yet been established. This paper seeks to address this gap by reporting on a survey of Australian universities' approaches to fostering and building capacity in inclusive pedagogy.

Method of enquiry

Two methods of inquiry were used to observe and describe the current institutional supports available to higher education teachers around inclusive teaching / Universal Design for Learning (UDL) - desktop audit and survey. Both of these methods are descriptive, in that they outline the amount of data available and its general characteristics (Davis, 2013). This approach was appropriate given the present lack of information regarding the extent to which Australian universities are engaging with capacity building, induction and professional development around inclusive education, and need to understand current practice as a basis for recommending change and further development. The use of two separate methods of inquiry enabled a more comprehensive picture to emerge of current practice, with responses sought from all Australian universities in both cases.

Desktop audit

A desktop audit of publicly available policies and procedures at Australian universities was completed in August 2014. This audit encompassed all 38 national universities, and utilised the search function on the policy pages of their websites. Two key terms were used to

locate relevant policies and procedures: "inclusive teaching" and "universal design". A Microsoft Excel database was constructed to extract data, and the following variables were recorded: presence/absence of each search team, location of search term if present, and presence/absence of specific policy or procedure addressing inclusive teaching/UDL. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the outcomes of this audit.

Survey

This part of the study received approval from the Faculty of Health Human Ethics Advisory Group of the university in which it took place. A list of equity and diversity staff and Deans or Associate Deans of Teaching and Learning or equivalent teaching and learning leaders at every Australian university (n=270) was created by a search of each institution's online staff directory, and all were invited to participate by email to complete the online survey. Participants were also recruited from the Australian Tertiary Education Networks email lists, Edequity and Austed. Members of this list—a total of 307—were invited by email to complete the online survey. In total, 88 participants entered the survey; however, only 42 went on to provide their responses. The reasons so many participations entered but did not start the survey are unknown. It may be that respondents were curious about the nature of the survey questions but did not wish to participate. The majority of respondents (78.57%, n=33) identified themselves as members of the teaching and learning leadership at their university. A small percentage identified as belonging to equity and diversity departments (11.92%, n=4), with the remainder nominating miscellaneous academic roles or preferring not to disclose.

There was no suitable existing instrument, so a mixed methods survey was developed based on themes identified in the literature review. An email invited participants to complete the survey, including a link to it online if they wished to continue. The first page of the survey included a plain language statement, and a question asking participants to confirm their consent to participate in the survey. The survey consisted of ten questions (two closed questions, two open questions and six mixed questions), and took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. The survey was available for a period of 14 days in late 2012. Minimal demographic information was collected to maintain anonymity and encourage participants to complete the survey.

Quantitative data derived from the survey was analysed descriptively, using means, frequencies and percentages. Not all participants answered every question so valid responses only are reported below. Qualitative analysis was undertaken by three researchers, with each researcher independently coding and categorising the data. The researchers met to identify patterns and themes in the data and to formulate a set of agreed codes and categories. These categories were then re-analysed in light of themes identified in the literature review to ensure no themes in the data were missed and to adjust any overlapping categories.

All of the participants who commenced the survey chose to nominate the state in which their university was located. Participants originated from all Australian states and the Australian Capital Territory, with Victoria (33.3%, n=14) and New South Wales (23.8%, n=10) having the highest numbers of participants. Participants were also asked to nominate which of four Australian University

networks their university belonged to, as identifying their university could potentially have revealed their identity.

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) includes five universities located in mainland states. The Group of Eight (G08) is a coalition of universities that are research intensive, and provide general and professional education. Innovative Research Universities Australia (IRU) is a group of seven universities that focus on research of national and international standing. The Regional Universities Network encompasses six universities outside major cities, and the other category (encompassing the remaining thirteen Australian universities) is unaligned. Table 1 displays the number of participants from universities in each group.

Table 1: ***Alignment of universities***

State /Territory	Number of Participants (%)
Unaligned	16 (38.1)
Innovative Research Universities	8 (19.0)
Australian Technology Network Universities	7 (16.7)
Group of Eight	7 (16.7)
Regional Universities Network	4 (9.5)
Total	42 (100.0)

Institutional support for teaching staff around inclusive teaching at Australian Universities

Policies and Procedures

The concepts of inclusive teaching and UDL were present in 19 policies and procedures, across 13 Australian Universities (34.2%). In the majority of cases, inclusive teaching was the preferred term, with only the University of South Australia using UDL instead. These terms were most often located within disability-related policies (47.37%, n=9), or general equity and diversity policies (21.05%, n=4). However, references to these concepts were also found in teaching and learning policies and guidelines, assessment policies, program review and re-accreditation procedures, internationalisation responsibility policies and as principles in course administration guidelines.

Three Australian universities have policies or procedures which specifically address inclusive teaching. The Australian Catholic University (2008) has a policy which lists the principles of inclusive curriculum, while Central Queensland University (2012) has embedded specific inclusive teaching goals within its Inclusive Practices Disability Plan. However, the University of Newcastle (2013) has the most comprehensive inclusive teaching policy, with guidelines which outline the

knowledge and skills which lecturing staff should bring to bear in this area.

Survey Findings

The findings of the survey found a comprehensive range of current practices for professionally developing inclusive teaching in Australian universities. The two most frequently reported were induction for new staff (n=13) and professional development workshops (n=13). Many of these initiatives related to specific aspects of inclusion, such as "occasional staff training in themed areas e.g. teaching visual impaired students." Respondents described some general development programs that provide an inclusive teaching component, but some barriers to and limitations of this approach were also identified. One participant cited "limited financial assistance to attend," while another stated that such training from a teaching and learning department was "somewhat esoteric and poorly attended."

The full range of practices identified by participants is included in Table 2, but there were often multiple responses from the same participant. In a few cases (n=3, 7.1%), no practices were identified, and in the words of one participant, "No idea. Inclusive teaching would be a new kid on the block as far as my institution is concerned."

Participants in the survey identified two main professional development formats – embedded in existing teaching and learning professional development (44.19%, n=19) and single workshops sporadically attended (44.19%, n=19). The degree to which this professional development was embedded within university processes varied widely. Some participants reported no embedding at all, while others indicated professional

Table 2: ***Current inclusive education professional development practices in Australia***

Practices	Number of Responses
Induction for new staff, Professional development workshops	13
University awards	5
Curriculum initiatives	4
Formalised courses (i.e. Grad Cert)	3
Retention and transition positions, Education developers	3
Other practices (i.e. blended learning, Course monitoring and review, SETU (Student Evaluation of Teaching and Units) completions, Inclusive teaching KPIs, eNewsletters, Networking, Project funding, Student experience working groups, Disability action plan, Resources for staff and students, Policy revisions)	1

Table 3: ***Four levels of implementation of professional development for inclusive teaching***

No current implementation
Ad hoc activities
Individual practitioners
Individuals opt in, limited uptake
One off workshops
Student services division offers workshops on request
Systemic initiatives: limited uptake or application
Individuals opt in to professional development, wide engagement
Systemic professional development for continuing staff only
Inclusion issues widely discussed, but not applied to teaching practice
Programs with inclusive elements that are not identified as 'inclusive'
Programs target specific disciplines, issues or student cohorts
Systemic initiatives: University-wide participation
Compulsory equity and access training
Institutional Inclusive teaching models progressing from disability focus to diversity focus
Inclusive teaching and learning embedded in curriculum design and staff development

development was fully embedded within curriculum design and staff development; "All new academic staff must attend teaching and learning foundations program (unless exempt)." Between these two extremes existed a range of professional development activities that varied in quality, frequency, degree of systemic "embeddedness," uptake, and continuing and sessional staff participation. These activities are summarised in Table 3. Survey participants were also asked to describe the subject and content of the professional development in inclusive teaching provided at their university. In many cases, the reported content was not specific to inclusive teaching, but rather general teaching and learning topics such as curriculum development (n = 5, 11.9%) and assessment (n = 5, 11.9%). Many of the

inclusive education professional development initiatives related to teaching specific sub-groups of students, including those with a disability (n = 7, 16. 7%), students from a low socio-economic background (n = 2, 4.8%) and indigenous students (n = 3, 7.1%). Cultural diversity training, cultural/linguistic awareness, specific content around interactions between local and international students and cultural competence was recognised by a relatively small number of participants (n=11, 26.2%). Other content identified by more than one participant included inclusive spaces (n = 2, 4.8%), general awareness raising (n = 3, 7.1), inclusive teaching online (n = 2, 4.8%) and specific methods to support inclusivity (n = 3, 7.1%).

Many survey participants in this study, however, when asked who undertook professional development for inclusive teaching, nominated both permanent (n=29, 69.0%) and casual (n=21, 50.0%) academic staff. Permanent professional or general staff were also offered these development opportunities (n=13, 30.9%), but not as frequently. One comment indicated the reasons for undertaking this professional development may vary across staff type and circumstance: "As material is online it is available to all staff, however specific training is required for promotion and key positions but is not curriculum specific." Significantly, respondents from 19.0% (n=8) of participating institutions reported either that there was no professional development in inclusive teaching at their university, or that they were unaware of any.

Survey participants identified a broad range of drivers of professional development and other activities supporting inclusive teaching, but none was consistently nominated across the sample. These drivers included greater emphasis on online and blended learning, changes in institutional strategic plans, curriculum models, structure and leadership, reaccreditation, availability of funding opportunities and changes in overall professional development programs. Only one respondent indicated their institution intended to reduce their offerings in professional development in inclusive teaching, suggesting its presence in higher education is potentially increasing.

Discussion and conclusions

This study has found that a minority of Australian universities refer to inclusive teaching or UDL in their policies and procedures, and that the majority of professional development for inclusive teaching in higher education consists of one-off workshops focussing on accommodating specific groups of students. Universities have historically problematised student diversity and addressed learner differences by identifying and addressing students with particular "needs,", leaving untouched the institutional policies and inflexible teaching and assessment methods that generated the problems in the first place. While there are signs of greater activity around inclusive teaching in Australian universities, it is not widely embedded into either policy or professional development.

The current ad hoc and fragmented approach has significant implications for the inclusion of all students in higher education. The ongoing association of inclusive teaching with "other" students characterises it as a specialist activity, rather than as the foundation for quality teaching in general. It also reduces the diversity of students to a set of "categories" such as disability and cultural background.

Perceptions of inclusive teaching must evolve to embrace the multiple forms of diversity present in contemporary student cohorts including academic preparedness, motivation, expectations and patterns of student participation (Clarke and Nelson, 2014). Recent resources around inclusive teaching in higher education such as the UDL on Campus website (http://udloncampus.cast.org/) include a wider range of case studies and materials, suggesting this shift is beginning to occur. Hockings, Cooke and Bowl's (2010) description of *Connectionist pedagogy* suggests some principles to focus these efforts: flexible, student-centred teaching that connects learning with students' lives and developing identities and encourages them to share their beliefs, knowledges and experiences.

This study found that currently there are inconsistent levels of awareness and understanding of inclusive teaching and the principles of UDL, and little evidence of institutional policies, procedures, activities and strategic planning to drive and sustain inclusive pedagogy. Where inclusive teaching professional development is provided, its availability for continuing contract and sessional staff is not guaranteed, and the most common approach is to offer sporadic, opt-in workshops that are unlikely to lead to systemic changes in culture and practice. Teaching for inclusion for all students entails embedding the practices of UDL within the classroom, curriculum and assessment methods (Burgstahler & Cory, 2008; Hockings, 2010; Rose & Gravel, 2010). It also requires the creation of inclusive learning environments, and of integrated curricula, assessment and learning activities that operate across unit, program and institutional levels (Skelton, 2002; Larkin, Nihill & Devlin, 2014).

The development of policies, procedures and professional development to embed inclusive teaching in Australian universities must also address the organisational culture and resourcing issues that are potential barriers to its implementation. Enhancing academics' literacy in UDL practices and ways of thinking requires the establishment of a culture that values them, supported by professional development activities and a strong policy framework to sustain and embed UDL across the institution (Thomas & May, 2010). While the costs associated with retrofitting inclusive practices is well recognised as a barrier to the adoption of UDL (Stanford, 2009), this may be the only viable course of action in the current context.

Collaboration between Australian universities could yield significant benefits in the understanding and practice of inclusive pedagogy through sharing perspectives, experiences and examples of good practice. A national initiative to share case studies, best practices and resources would prevent the ad hoc approach that currently prevails, and make best use of each institution's relatively limited resources. For example, through collaboration, a nationally available online professional development module could be developed for all university staff, and communities of practice established to meet ongoing needs for networking and lifelong learning. The infusion model of inclusive pedagogy (Larkin, Nihill & Devlin, 2014) is one recently developed framework for embedding inclusive practice and UDL in higher education. In this model, teaching academics are encouraged to define inclusive pedagogy for themselves, and design and evaluate the inclusive learning outcomes they aim to achieve. This then not only meets the needs of students, but also supports educators to

be learners and members of a community of practitioners of inclusive teachers.

This study is the first attempt to describe the current institutional supports available to higher education teachers in Australia around inclusive teaching and UDL. Given the increasing diversity of students attending universities, developing a more cohesive and comprehensive national approach to inclusive teaching is a key priority. The identification of current professional development practices and resources is an important first step in this process, and has highlighted both significant gaps and emerging areas of good practice.

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